

The Master Craftsman of our Dreams

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After functioning as a Philosophical Midwife for many years I offer the following analogy as a model for your reflections:

Our dreams are to the difficulties and problems in our waking life very much like a skilled physician's diagnoses and treatments are to the troubled suffering of his patients' lives.

Consider what must follow if this analogy can be said to be both accurate and true. The maker of our dreams must be a master craftsman who offers us a diagnosis of our present struggles and problems with such astonishing skill that an understanding of the dream surfaces what was barely seen by us and in making it visible it becomes a cure for our troubled life. This maker must be said to possess a profound knowledge of our past, present and future which has been skillfully woven together to present us a rich tapestry of meanings as an antidote for our personal ignorance.

Further, once dreams can be shown to be intelligible then they can be understood as vehicles that embody meaning. It then becomes clear that every element and figure in a dream must have been carefully selected from the store house of our past experience to convey their meaning to us, that the states of mind presented in dreams are chosen with sophisticated discrimination to match our own condition, that the words and communications in these dreams have been brought together synergistically to offer a masterful portrayal of what is most significant for the dreamer to perceive about themselves.

Indeed we must add that dreams are so subtly crafted for their impact upon us and that they present themselves to us with such vividness and with such a sense of reality that we are drawn into them and completely identify with their unfolding drama. It is because of this that we can say that dreams are a realistic and exquisite art form.

Again, consider if dreams are intelligible within their own terms and can be understood to apply to the problems and personal difficulties encountered in the waking world then we participate in a dream world through which we can find guidance and direction for our own development as an intelligible being.

The level of our participation is a function of our ability to understand these dreams in their own terms and apply them to benefit our lives. In entering this challenge we learn what it is to be rational and how understanding dreams benefits us. Thus, we cultivate and develop our own mind to perceive the mind's messages and in grasping the meaning of this participation we realize that we participate in an Intelligence that has a direct interest in our own evolution into Intelligence.

Surely, it follows that no interpretations imposed upon either dreams or our waking world are required for us to reach meaning. For there is no need to interpret something if you know the language used which it was communicated in and that is equally true for any system of thought as well; what needs interpreting cannot be understood in terms of itself. To persuade

some one to accept an interpretation of one's condition is to cut short that search that lies behind the Delphic Oracle's Know Thyself and to convince another of such an interpretation belongs to the skill of the Rhetorician and not that of the Platonic philosopher.

The way of approaching both dreams and personal problems is the same because each can be seen to complement the other. What is unfinished and puzzling in our waking world becomes the nature of the drama for our dreams. Dreams can disclose a meaning that is tested and verified in the experience of one's waking world as the intelligibility of each is a vivid reminder that our quest for meaning is the life of the mind.

But, what kinds of problems and difficulties are there that dreams present for our attention and solution? Only those blocks and obstacles that are experienced in our quest for personal excellence become the subject of the dream master's art. Whenever we try to reach or achieve a level of excellence in something that is personally significant to us, it is at that time that those deeply held beliefs about oneself and reality are challenged. All the beliefs about oneself and reality that are irreconcilable with the attainment of a meaningful goal surface and must be dealt with before we can attain and integrate such goals. It is here that we can see the integrity of the Mind most clearly: For you can't have that which signifies one's self worth while still holding to a belief about oneself that is less than ideal.

The range of beliefs that block our vision move from the personal to the metaphysical. Socratic dialectic functions as Philosophical Midwifery as it exposes false beliefs about the most profound of visions, and the highest expression of that art occurs when the Good is shown as different from the Idea of the Good. For whenever we accept ideas about ourselves or reality as true when they are based upon beliefs we are dealing with the shadow of reality and not its essence.

These false beliefs about the self are the prejudices against the self and even though some are only dimly perceived they are nonetheless felt as being indubitably true. Prejudice is to pre-judge, to judge without sufficient evidence, to conclude about the self being either high or low is a prejudice because the self is beyond comparative categories. Questioning the legitimacy of these false beliefs challenges ignorance to justify itself. It is this challenging of false beliefs, of ignorance, that is the traditional quest and practice of philosophy and when it is conducted in dialogue with another it becomes a mode of philosophical counseling called Philosophical Midwifery.

The exploration of how these beliefs became believable, the discovery of what has maintained them into the present, and the effect they have on one's existence is but the Socratic quest to understand why the prisoners take the shadows on the wall of the cave as their reality. What we call false beliefs are often unexpressed yet they have a strange kind of life of their own; and they are visible and survive in the attitudes, moods, and gestures of their believers.

Dreams may be extended discourses, dramas, lengthy stories within stories, some frightening some beautiful and some have only one scene with no action and only with a few words. Whatever form the dream takes they can be approached in the same way. To outline the steps used in the exploration of a dream we shall use a story dream. (Experience has shown that it is wise not to proceed with any step if the dreamer shows any reluctance to participate further

and the dreamer should know they can resume an exploration at a later time when they choose to do so.)

Consider the following:

1. The need for accuracy in dealing with dreams:

The dream must be audio-recorded and transcribed because any time gap between the dream and its recording, or between the dream and its transcription, allows interpretation and forgetfulness to distort the message.

It is important for the dreamer to realize the degree to which they themselves distort their own dreams. Asking those with whom one practices this art to make the following comparison makes this point abundantly clear: Make a comparison between an audio-recording upon waking and the recollection of the same dream at a later time; this will confirm not only that interpretation has a distorting effect on the dream's original content but that the interpretation is invariably in the direction of supporting their own belief structures.

2. Charting the dream:

The dream should be visually charted out on a blackboard or paper before the dreamer and during the exploration of the dream their attention should be drawn to it rather than the philosophical midwife. By directing attention on the material the dreamer learns that the material they present is the primary object of reflection and the most important thing to wonder about.

3. Dream sequence:

The sequences of the dream should be carefully noted as stages unfolding. The dreamer then can see where in the sequence of the dream there are important shifts taking place, where the action becomes crucial, and where the conflict occurs.

4. The natural divisions of the dream:

Separate each of the dramas, or the themes, of the dream as divisions or major parts and within these themes or parts the stages or scenes can be shown. After each of the divisions are made and the analysis of each division is completed the dreamer's attention should be directed to the meanings of these shifts or divisions. They can discover that the divisions create parallel structures, contrasts of themes, and how the dream must change to incorporate another stage of the idea being unfolded.

5. Allow the dreamer to go over the dream again as a Recollection:

The recollection of the dream will bring up additional elements that were forgotten and these items must be added to the story of the dream and marked in such a way that they can be distinguished from the original statement of the dream. The dreamer can learn in this way the value of reflecting on the dream since another level is revealed by this reflecting and its importance becomes clear in offering a deeper level of meaning.

6. The three elements: The action, the state of mind, and the words:

As the dreamer recalls the dream attention should be focused on each of the scenes within each act of the drama so that each action can be carefully noted, the state of mind or the emotional state of the participants of the dream are described and preserved, and whatever words or communication presenting the dream are noted.

7. Analysis begins:

In every dream there is a mystery or a puzzle that must be explored. If the dream is approached as a story then the mystery can be identified as any conflicting, puzzling, or contradictory element within the dream itself. There are times when this state of the analysis must be approached carefully, slowly, and often it is important for this stage to be reserved for later in the analysis.

8. The Before and After the Mystery:

Note how the events that lead up to and follow the point of the mystery. Contrast the stages that came before and after the mystery. There are some dreams that end with the mystery and under this circumstance it is important to express what they think might follow if the dream were to proceed further. The purpose of this stage of the analysis is that it will dramatically present the dream's content as the puzzle to be solved in its own terms.

9. Review within and without the dream world:

Note the role of the words and state of mind in the action around the mystery point and explore when the dreamer experienced a similar state of mind in their waking world. The dreamer should be encouraged to reflect on recent experiences of that state of mind because it is often ignored or forgotten. The three elements previously described (step 6) should be carefully reviewed with the dreamer so that they can realize how the words in the dream capture the central issue of the mystery and how it relates to the state of mind of the dreamer in the dream itself.

10. The past history of that experience:

Allow the dreamer to explore other examples of that state of mind and encourage them to discuss the role it has had in their lives.

11. Comparisons between the dream and the waking world:

Comparisons will be made as the dreamer is brought to reflect on the material that has been brought to the surface. Comparisons will occur in a natural way between the dream and the waking world of the dreamer. Richer connections between past and present will be made when the key words from the dream are focused upon. As comparisons are drawn it is helpful to return to the dream and examine the personal meanings attached to every image and person reported in the dream.

12. Persistent Difficulties:

Often there are some persistent difficulties in understanding a dream and the dreamer should be urged to watch future dreams because they often return to the same issues and amplify and correct prior understandings and misreadings. It is not unusual for succeeding dreams to return to earlier themes and mysteries and present them in new ways and perspectives.

13. The Return to the Dream Master:

As the exploration of the dream gains meaning it is important to bring the dreamer to reflect on that fact that the dream itself is a work of art, that it contains its own meaning, and that it can be related to their own lives.

Now, let us return to our earlier image, that of the Master Craftsman of our dreams and add to it. Consider the application of knowledge for our benefit follows the example of the

physician's art because it is through medical knowledge that a diagnosis and treatment are designed. The clearer the physician's idea of health the better the diagnosis and treatment that he can provide because the perceived difference between the condition of a particular body and the ideal of a healthy body constitutes the grounds for the diagnosis and the treatment.

The dream master then must have a clear idea of what constitutes the excellence of mankind and it must be towards this that he looks and only from this that his craft is displayed. The craft makes possible the provision for our good, a good appropriate to the time, and that assists us to realize the end we seek. It is interesting, is it not, that these ideas define the operation of providence? Here we have the reasons and experience to conclude that we need not be strangers to a wisdom that extends itself to all, and those who participate in this intelligence move away from the shadowland of belief into a higher mode of intelligence. This is the very ideal that we are all struggling to evolve and by participating in this struggle we become conscious participants in our own inner development.

A philosopher that practices this art sees again and again the origin of belief, the growth of understanding, the role of ideals, and finds evidence for the existence of a spiritual doctor of the soul to whom he can play only a modest role of an assistant, a philosophical midwife. A philosophical midwife assists those who are pregnant with ideas and who suffer the travails of birthing those ideas. In practicing this art within the realm of dreams and counseling the philosopher joins that tradition that has Socrates as its ideal practitioner.

Experience has shown that not everyone who has been academically or formally trained in philosophy can be a philosophical midwife rather it seems it is a gift and even to these only some can cultivate and grow Platonically. It may be asked what is Platonic about the study of dreams but in answer we only need to recall that in Plato's Republic Socrates urges the study of dreams as the way to reach knowledge of oneself, a knowledge that reaches into the past, present and future.